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Melvin Dummar, 74, Who Claimed Howard Hughes Left Him Millions, Dies

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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On a long drive through the Nevada desert one night in 1967, Melvin Dummar spotted a scruffy man lying by the side of the road. He picked him up and drove him to Las Vegas. During the ride, he said, the man told him he was Howard Hughes.

The encounter might have been forgotten except for what happened nine years later, when Mr. Hughes, one of the richest men in the world, died. Mr. Dummar claimed to have received a copy of his handwritten will and, lo and behold, it said that Mr. Hughes had left him one-sixteenth of his estate, an estimated \$156 million.

The revelation catapulted Mr. Dummar, at that point the owner of a gas station in Willard, Utah, to the center of a media circus. He was even the subject of a monologue by Johnny Carson on his late-night talk show. (Mr. Carson remarked that people all over the country would probably start picking up hitchhikers.)

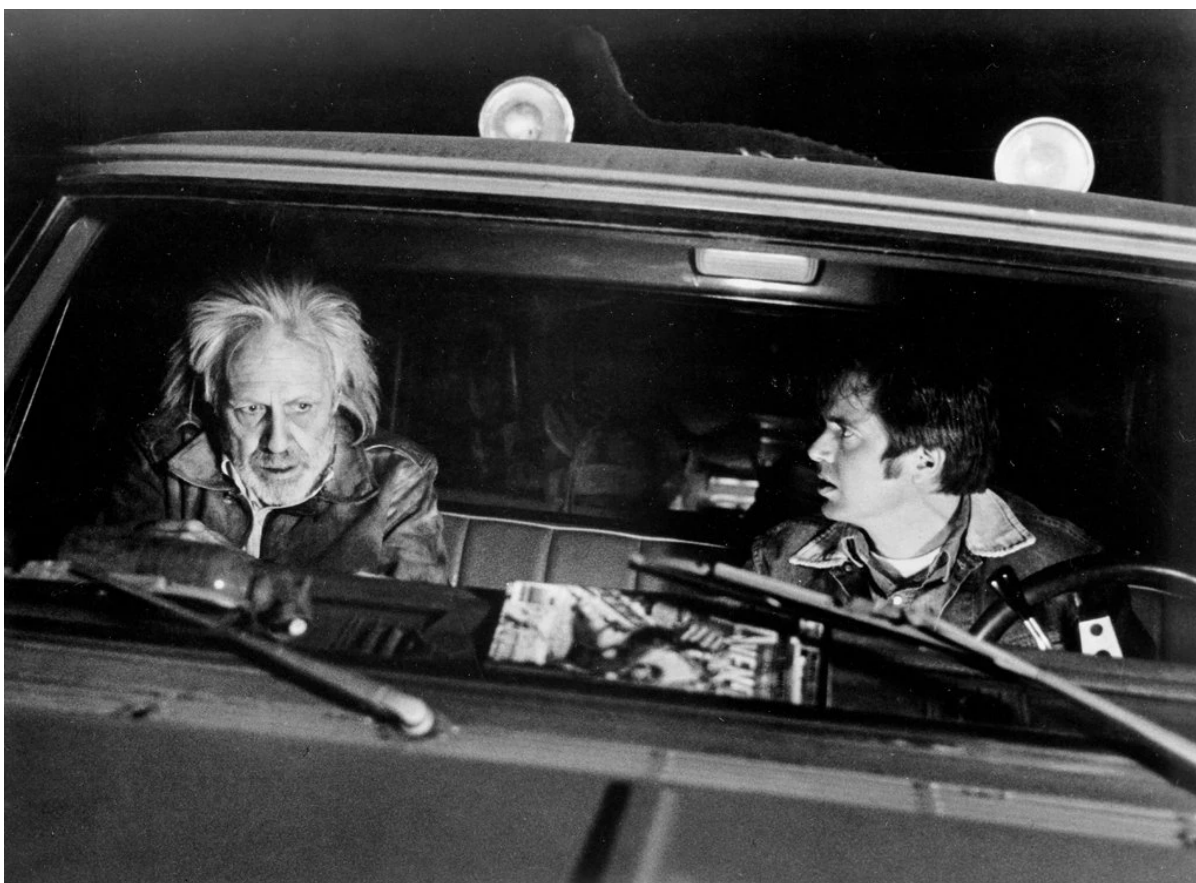
Mr. Hughes died with no surviving immediate family and, according to his extended family, no will — which was why the document produced by Mr. Dummar, loaded with misspellings and incorrect information (unusual for the meticulous Mr. Hughes), caused such a sensation.

Those relatives stood to inherit the Hughes fortune, estimated at more than \$2 billion (about \$9 billion today), if they could prove that the will brought forth by Mr. Dummar was fraudulent.

Off to court they went. The will was ruled inauthentic, and Mr. Dummar never received a penny from the Hughes estate. He died of cancer on Sunday at 74 in Pahrump, Nev.

By the time the Hughes inheritance was settled by a probate court jury in Texas in 1981, more than 600 people had made claims to the fortune, and 40 wills, all supposedly written by Mr. Hughes, had been produced and rejected. Mr. Hughes's money was divided among descendants on both his mother's and his father's side.

Given all those other claims and all those other wills, Mr. Dummar might have barely registered as a footnote in the biography of the eccentric Mr. Hughes, an aviation pioneer, movie producer, romancer of leading ladies and reclusive germophobe.



Paul Le Mat, right, played Mr. Dummar and Jason Robards Jr. was Howard Hughes in Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning film "Melvin and Howard," released in 1980.

Universal Pictures

But Mr. Dummar captured the imagination of Hollywood, and in 1980 his tale was at the center of Jonathan Demme's well-received movie "Melvin and Howard," starring Paul Le Mat as Mr. Dummar and Jason Robards Jr. as Mr. Hughes. (The movie won two Oscars: one for Mary Steenburgen, who played Mr. Dummar's first wife, for best supporting actress, and one for Bo Goldman, for best screenplay.)

The movie portrayed Mr. Dummar as a struggling Everyman, well intentioned, drowning in debt and dogged by bad choices, to whom something truly extraordinary *might* have happened.

The critic Pauline Kael of The New Yorker said that the movie was "an almost flawless act of sympathetic imagination," and that Mr. Demme showed "perhaps a finer understanding of lower-middle-class life than any other American director."

Melvin Earl Dummar was born on Aug. 28, 1944, in Cedar City, Utah. His father, Arnold, was a miner and worked in construction; his mother, Chloe (Winder) Dummar, was a homemaker. He grew up in Fallon, in western Nevada, and held a series of odd jobs, including truck driver and milk deliveryman. He enjoyed writing songs and even appeared on the game show "Let's Make a Deal."

But once the will naming him a beneficiary was ruled a fraud in 1978, Mr. Dummar's life took a dark turn.

He suffered a damaging blow in court when he acknowledged that he had lied about the will's provenance. It was found in Salt Lake City at the headquarters of the Mormon Church — the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — which was also a beneficiary. Mr. Dummar, who was Mormon, insisted that he had no idea how it got there.

But after his fingerprints were found on the envelope, he testified that a stranger had given it to him at his gas station and that he had taken it to the church headquarters.

A jury decided that the will was forged, and while no one was ever officially charged, Mr. Dummar was found guilty in the court of public opinion.

“I wouldn't have had a chance even if God himself had delivered the will,” Mr. Dummar told The Deseret News in 2005. “So many people thought I was a con artist or a scammer. And they treated me like a criminal.”

Mr. Dummar, at a book-signing event, with copies of Gary N. Magesen's “The Investigation,” published in 2005. Mr. Magesen, a retired F.B.I. agent, sided with Mr. Dummar after investigating his claims that he was a rightful heir to Howard Hughes's fortune. Scott G. Winterton/Deseret Morning News, via Associated Press

He was shunned and had a hard time finding work. In his later years, he was self-employed, selling frozen meat door to door in the vast open spaces of Utah and Nevada, where grocery stores were few and far between.

News reports said that Mr. Dummar had earlier been twice married to and divorced from the same woman, and that he is survived by his wife, Bonnie (Bonneau) Dummar; two children; two stepsons; and a number of siblings, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Over the years, a retired F.B.I. agent, Gary N. Magnesen, investigated Mr. Dummar's claims and wrote two books — "The Investigation" (2005) and "Stolen Justice" (2015) — in his defense.

Mr. Magnesen, who oversaw organized-crime investigations in Las Vegas and confirmed Mr. Dummar's death, said in a telephone interview that when he began looking into the case, "I was very skeptical because all I knew was a lot of the media story."

But, he said, he unearthed several witnesses, including one who said he had seen Mr. Hughes in the desert visiting a brothel at the same time that Mr. Dummar was driving through.

Mr. Magnesen said he believed that the will was legitimate but that Mr. Dummar had been steamrollered during the legal proceedings, which, he said, had been replete with acts of obstruction of justice, witness intimidation and possible jury tampering. He said that he had sought to have the case reopened, but that his motion was denied.

Other researchers have reached the opposite conclusion.

Geoff Schumacher, the author of "Howard Hughes: Power, Paranoia & Palace Intrigue" (2008), said in a phone interview that there had been no logical reason for Mr. Hughes to be in the desert without his usual coterie of aides, and that the handwriting on the will was not even close to Mr. Hughes's.

Mr. Schumacher, an executive at the Mob Museum in Las Vegas, said he believed that Mr. Dummar had picked up someone in the desert, but that it could not have been Howard Hughes.

Still, he said, Mr. Dummar was a likable and sympathetic figure, "a guy just trying to get along in the world," and that in telling his story he had always been consistent.

"In recent years, in places like rural Nevada and rural Utah," Mr. Schumacher said, "there were many, many people who believed Melvin's story. He was one of them. And they believed he got screwed."

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